

## Access to dental services for people living with dementia

### Summary

- Maintaining oral health is essential as it directly influences overall health, wellbeing and quality of life.
- Poor oral health is a significant public health concern, particularly among people aged 75 and older, as well as those with specialised healthcare needs such as dementia.
- Lack of dementia knowledge among aged care and disability staff and dentists contribute to poor oral health outcomes.
- A shortage of specialised dental professionals, long waitlists and high cost of dental services contribute to difficulty accessing and affording dental care.
- Policies and initiatives that improve accessibility, affordability and quality of dental care for people living with dementia are needed as well as training and education for dental professionals and the aged and disability workforce.

### Background

Maintaining oral health is essential for people living with dementia as oral health directly impacts overall wellbeing and quality of life. Dental issues can cause pain, discomfort, difficulty in eating and speaking and poor oral hygiene has been associated with systemic health problems, such as pneumonia and cardiovascular diseases, which can further exacerbate the health challenges already faced by people living with dementia.<sup>1</sup>

Poor oral health is a significant issue affecting many people in Australia, particularly those aged 75 years and over.<sup>2</sup> Certain groups are at even greater risk of oral disease, such as those with additional and/or specialised healthcare needs, including people living with dementia.<sup>3</sup> With the increasing prevalence of dementia and higher risk for dental issues among this group, dental care is a growing public health concern for people living with dementia.

## Issue

Dental care is an essential aspect of overall health and wellbeing, yet for many people with dementia, being able to access and afford quality dental care can be a significant challenge. Several factors contribute to the challenge of maintaining dental care for people with dementia, especially in residential aged care facilities. One of the most important factors is a lack of care staff, dentists and dental support staff with dementia training.

Additionally, the cost associated with dental care can be a significant barrier for those with limited financial resources. Long waitlists for public dental treatment are a concern, particularly for people living with dementia who may require more urgent attention. Moreover, with a large proportion of residents in residential aged care facilities requiring partial or full dentures, there have been several reports that dentures often get misplaced or lost entirely and end up needing to be replaced. The cost of replacing a complete set of dentures have been reported to be substantial, which presents a significant financial burden to individuals and their carers, as the responsibility of replacement is put on them.

**“ The personnel seemed unwilling to make any effort to understand the symptoms and consequences of dementia. Furthermore, they were very aggressive to me when I asked them to frame the way they talked to my Mum in a way that did not imply criticism. ”**

Carer of person living with dementia

People with dementia may be taking medication for a number of conditions, and some medications can have an adverse effect on tooth decay through reduced saliva production.<sup>4</sup> Reduced saliva combined with a diet high in sugar in residential aged care facilities, and a lack of emphasis on oral health, increases the risk of dental issues. Additionally, people with dementia may experience changes in behaviour that can make it difficult for them to tolerate dental treatment. The combination of these factors highlights the need for increased awareness and training among aged and disability care staff, dentists and dental support staff regarding the unique challenges faced by people with dementia in maintaining their oral health.

Carers of people living with dementia have expressed concern over the limited knowledge of dementia among aged care staff and dental professionals. People with dementia require special care, particularly regarding oral health. The lack of training in dementia care may lead to challenges in providing adequate oral health care, and the signs of oral health issues in this population are under-recognised. It is therefore crucial for care staff and dental professionals to receive appropriate dementia education to be able to provide quality care for people living with dementia.

Dental care for people living with dementia is a complex issue that requires policy solutions to increase access and improve oral health outcomes. The lack of accessibility and affordability of dental care services, as well as the poor quality of care provided in some facilities, is a significant concern. These challenges underscore the need for policy changes that prioritise the dental health and overall wellbeing of people living with dementia.

**“ It would be nice if more dentists had the opportunity to have a module in dementia care so more would understand dementia and how to talk to someone with dementia. ”**

Carer of someone with dementia

## Dementia Australia's position

Dementia Australia advocates for compulsory dementia training and education for the aged care workforce. This training should focus on enhancing their understanding of dementia and dental health, including understanding the different types of dementia, impact of medications on oral health, food and nutrition, communication and responding to changed behaviours. By equipping care staff with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can better support individuals with dementia in maintaining their oral health and improve health outcomes.

Access to dementia training for dentists and dental care staff is also recommended. This specialised training will enable dental professionals to better understand the unique challenges faced by people with dementia when it comes to dental care.

Exploring policy and funding models that ensure equitable access to preventative and proactive dentistry for vulnerable populations, including those with dementia is necessary. It is crucial to develop funding mechanisms that prioritise the oral health needs of individuals with dementia and provide adequate financial support to overcome the barriers they face in accessing dental care.

Dementia Australia emphasises the importance of fostering partnerships between residential aged care facilities and dentists. Collaborative efforts can lead to improved integration of dental care services within these facilities, ensuring that residents with dementia receive timely and appropriate oral healthcare.

Greater compliance with Standard 3 of the Aged Care Quality Standards, which pertains to personal care and clinical care is required to ensure any failings in dental care are addressed to ensure that individuals with dementia receive the highest quality of oral health support.

Dementia Australia also calls for the development of processes aimed at safeguarding residents' dental property in residential aged care, including dentures. Clear accountability should be established to replace lost dentures, and residents and their families should be actively involved in identifying and protecting their dental assets.

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- 1 Oral Health among Elderly, Impact on Life Quality, Access of Elderly Patients to Oral Health Services and Methods to Improve Oral Health: A Narrative Review (2022). Journal of personalized medicine.
  - 2 Australia's Oral Health: National Study of Adult Oral Health (2017-18). Adelaide: The University of Adelaide, South Australia.
  - 3 Queensland Health 2008. PDF Download Healthy Teeth for Life fact sheet – Dry mouth - external site opens in new window. Viewed 26 September 2018.
  - 4 Australian Dental Association (2023). [teeth.org.au/dementia](https://teeth.org.au/dementia)